

## 9

### Mai i te ngahere oranga A restricted competition in the Pacific

Alessandro Melis and Michael Davis

Alessandro Melis and Michael Davis architects, New Zealand



#### Italy and New Zealand

Moving from Italy to New Zealand is an experience that can lead to re-thinking many preconceived Eurocentric world visions from a personal and an architectural perspective. Italy and New Zealand are two places at the antipodes, not just geographically. Italy is very densely populated with centuries-old traditions that have solidified into an imposing state apparatus. New Zealand is the opposite: a young nation, with an extremely agile administrative structure and one of the lowest population densities in the world. In architecture the differences and their consequences are very noticeable.

Projects that in Italy would be under public control, such as schools, hospitals and museums, in New Zealand are

in fact more frequently managed by private institutions. Despite its smaller population the number of opportunities for architects in New Zealand is greater as there are also fewer architects.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are fewer public competitions in New Zealand than in Italy, architects there also typically define competitions to cover procedures that in the EU are categorised as private negotiations. They do so wherever competitions are undertaken on the basis of an expression of interest and a limited number of designers, 4 or 5, are invited to formulate a proposal, by either a private or public administration.

When a competition is announced the chance of success in New Zealand is higher because there is already more

work relative to the size of the profession. We had found this out when we engaged in New Zealand's first competition to adopt 'Passivhaus' standards.

There are many distinct differences between competitions in Italy and New Zealand and it's impossible to discuss all of them here, but the 'Mai i te ngahere oranga' competition, a small restricted competition procedure which we participated in, provides a useful direct comparison (figure 9.2-9.4). It is particularly informative because it illustrates how New Zealand undertakes a competition in comparison to Italy, for a similar project.

#### 'Mai i te ngahere oranga'

Our 2015 participation in this competition to select the designers and curators of the New Zealand national exhibition at the Venice Biennale was undertaken with colleagues and students, including Liam Stumbles, Mauro Caria, and Niccolò Urbini.

Initially our chances of success had seemed impossible, despite the fact that we had previous experience of participating in the Venice Biennale – although never in a curatorial role. This is because in Italy this national curatorial role is assigned directly by a ministerial commission and drawn from architects who can only be nominated by the national government after a long and very complex selection procedure that's not transparent.

Apart from on some very rare occasions, the result is that the curators of the Italian pavilion have always been well-known names, or an expression of a particular political patronage. New, small or innovative practices have no chance. Yet participating in the Biennale is prized by Italian architects as a lifetime achievement, and becoming the curator of a national pavilion is regarded as a pinnacle in the profession.

So we were positively amazed to see our project shortlisted among five finalists, but even more surprised to find that only fifteen applications had been submitted. This would have been unheard of in Italy! To a large extent this was a result of choosing to hold a competitive selection, organised by the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA).

Our exhibition title "Mai i te ngahere oranga", the Maori for "Prosperity from the tree", was about building on New Zealand's timber tradition. The exhibition was to showcase New Zealand's timber architecture, projects built by architectural practices exploring and innovating in this tradition, and to market its timber resources, products and expertise. The competition brief was short, simple and clear, and the objectives were supported by the institute, the NZIA, and aligned to the profession's and industries' concerns. Furthermore the exhibition was intended as a vehicle to promote New Zealand's architecture, its profession and industry.

*"What seems interesting is that a lower number of submissions in New Zealand doesn't appear to mean lower quality"*

The summary competition requirements were:

- Grow potential interest in New Zealand's timber resources and timber architecture internationally.
- Design an exhibition that could be flexible, demountable and transportable so it could potentially be displayed in different venues nationally and internationally.
- Develop contact with public and private institutions interested in displaying the exhibition more widely.
- Develop sponsorship in New Zealand to promote the initiative nationally and further afield, particularly in the Asian market.

The core of the exhibition was to be a selection of recently awarded, domestic-scale timber architecture. The stated vision was not only to affirm their quality, crafting and landscape sensitivity but also to include the position of timber in New Zealand's construction and as an export resource. This provided the various elements for the exhibition programme.

The competition was won by Dr Charles Walker working with Kathy Waghorn, a colleague at the University of Auckland, who became co-director for the 2016 exhibition.

## Conclusion

Our participation nonetheless provided a very valuable insight into the procedural restrictions between competitions in Italy and New Zealand.

New Zealand's competition brief and process was simple and well organised, and was far more open to ideas and new-comers. This same competition in Italy is bureaucratic, complex, heavily specified and formalised, is only open to those complying with the governments' difficult criteria and access is by nomination. Furthermore in New Zealand the probability of success is significantly higher because there are fewer architects interested in competing.

The way the two countries then support funding their biennale exhibition after the conclusion of the competition, is also interesting.

New Zealand doesn't adequately pay the winners' time and experience for the significant amount of work required, from negotiating with funding bodies to supporting the international curation. This may also be a contributory reason that few in New Zealand entered this competition.

What seems interesting is that a lower number of submissions in New Zealand doesn't appear to mean lower quality. This is probably because the larger

number of Italian participants adds other pressures, the jury has less time to consider the individual submissions and there is an over-emphasis on the 'political' purpose, organisational aspects and values of the competition, which may result in distortion.

There is also a lack of real competition in Italy because the procedures deny young professionals access, and they are firmly held back in the shadows by restrictive Government entry criteria.

Entering and being shortlisted in this competition was a great benefit to our practice as it attracted significant national interest, was extremely well promoted throughout New Zealand and has been presented in the MoMA, New York, at the Open City symposium on theatrical installation (figure 9.1). This has proved to be a valuable practice promotion which would not have been available to us in Italy.

## Reference:

<sup>1</sup> Mirza & Nacey Research. The Architectural Profession in Europe 2016. A Sector Study. Brussels: Architects' Council of Europe. Conseil des Architectes D'Europe; 2016. Table 1-1, p. 1-10. [www.ace-cae.eu/fileadmin/New\\_Upload/7\\_Publications/Sector\\_Study/2016/2016\\_EN\\_FN\\_070217\\_new.pdf](http://www.ace-cae.eu/fileadmin/New_Upload/7_Publications/Sector_Study/2016/2016_EN_FN_070217_new.pdf) (accessed 22/04/2018) - Estimated number of architects: Italy 157,000, 2.6 per 1,000 of population. "With 26.2% of Europe's architects Italy proportionally has the highest number relative to its population"



figure 9.1  
Mai i te ngahere  
oranga presentation  
at MoMA, New York



PROJECT DATA

Name	MAI I TE NGAHERE ORANGA. NEW ZEALAND EXHIBITION FOR THE VENICE BIENALE
Location	Palazzo Bollani, Castello, Venice
Country	NEW ZEALAND
Year	2015
PROJECT DESCRIPTION	
Type	Temporary exhibition - New Zealand timber architecture
Budget Cost	150,000 NZ\$, (€88,000) - including honorarium, see below
COMPETITION DESCRIPTION	
Client	New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA)
Prrogrammer/Agent	New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA)
Public/Private	Private
Procedure	Restricted procedure
Stages	2
Project Intention	Design and direct the NZ Venice Biennale National Exhibition including developing the creative idea, procuring the exhibition and delivering appropriate exhibition images and graphics, helping to obtain sponsorship, and allowing for the installation and de-installation costs of the exhibition by the appointed specialists
Conditions Applied	New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA)
COMPETITION FACTS	
Timescale	1st stage submission: 12 March 2015 2nd stage submission: 24 April 2015 Interview: 1 May 2015
Submission Required	Stage 1: A maximum of 5 A4 pages Stage 2: A4 report (roughly 13 pages) followed by interview
Number of Entries	15
ASSESSMENT & SELECTION	
Jury Numbers	Unknown
Jury Composition	Jury appointed by the NZIA, but otherwise the numbers and the names are unspecified in the call
Number Shortlisted	5
Winner	Dr Charles Walker, director of AUT University's Colab research institute, was appointed NZ creative director working with co-director Kathy Waghorn.
Runners Up	Euan Mac Kellar architect and Dr Anne Poulsen both from Auckland research organisation Superstudio Alessandro Melis and Michael Davis architects, University of Auckland's School of Architecture and Planning Anthony Hoete, a NZ architect based in London, and Giles Reid and Jason Whiteley, also London-based.
Prizes & Awards	An honorarium of \$20,000 (€11,700) from the project budget
Conclusion of Process	Project commission
Project Completion	2016
FURTHER INFORMATION	
New Zealand Exhibition Venice Biennale 2016: <a href="http://www.venice.nzia.co.nz">www.venice.nzia.co.nz</a>	



figure 9.2  
Mai i te ngahere  
oranga



figure 9.3  
Mai i te ngahere  
oranga

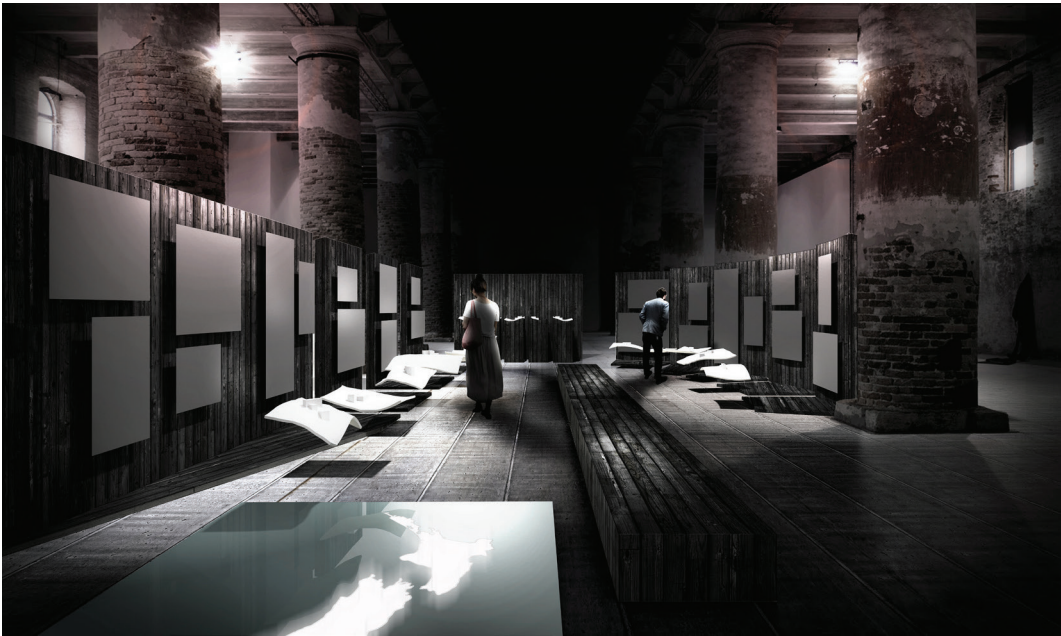


figure 9.4  
Mai i te ngahere  
oranga